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SUBJECT: (C) MEASURED RESPONSE IN DIYALA TO SAMARRA BOMBING; ISF RELUCTANT TO CONFRONT JAYSH AL-MAHDI

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶11. (U) This is a SET Ba'qubah cable.

¶12. (C) SUMMARY: The reaction in Diyala to the destruction of the al-Askariya shrine in Samarra has been restrained and generally focused on positive messages of shared determination to fight against takfirism, due in no small part to the responsible rhetoric and frenetic behind-the-scenes work by Diyala's religious and political leadership. Both Sunnis and Shi'as have generally kept their heads rather than responding to acts that could have been taken as substantial provocations - despite the unsettling, though not entirely surprising, unwillingness of the ISF to keep armed Jaysh al-Mahdi elements off the streets. Unfortunately, this good-news story has been overshadowed by several massacres carried out in the thinly populated southwest corner of the province, a topic that will be covered septel.
END SUMMARY.

FEB 22: SMALL DEMO AND CIVIL STRIFE CONTAINED;
GOVERNOR AND PC CHAIR PROCEED WITH IRAN VISIT

¶13. (SBU) News of the "Golden Mosque" explosion had filtered to all population centers in Diyala by the early afternoon of February 22. A small demonstration formed in the late afternoon in the Shi'a village of Huwaydir, a suburb of Ba'qubah where many of Diyala's primary Shi'a political "fixers" reside. It was accompanied by armed militiamen from the local "Sistani Brigades" as it marched into Ba'qubah, ultimately dispersing before reaching downtown.

¶14. (C) Also during mid-afternoon of February 22, events that are still in dispute occurred in central, predominantly Sunni, Muqdadiyah. According to our Sunni contacts, armed Jaysh al-Mahdi elements entered the city's marketplace and forcibly closed down shops in compliance with the call of Shi'a authorities for a mourning period. When some shopowners refused to close down their shops, the JAM members allegedly fired into such stores, in some cases igniting the merchandise and causing further damage to seven stores. (Sunni Assistant Governor Hafiz Abdulaziz al-Juburi, the owner of one of the damaged stores, has showed SET photographs taken of his store and others near it that show substantial gunfire damage.) There are counter-allegations by Shi'as of gunfire from Sunnis during this period as well. At some point during this exchange, one Sunni

was killed and five, including the brother of (Sunni) Deputy Governor Auwf Rahumi al-Rubay'i, were wounded in the crossfire. The Deputy Governor exercised restraint in calling for calm, which was restored to the marketplace area by early nightfall.

¶5. (C) The Deputy Governor's restraint was important, as he was not only the ranking Sunni provincial official, but the acting Governor. A delegation led by (Shi'a) Governor Ra'ad al-Mullah Jawad al-Timimi, which included Provincial Council Chairman Ibrahim Bajillan and several other Provincial Council members, DG's, and security officials was en route to Kermanshah, Iran, on the morning of February 22 when the Governor received the news of the destruction of the al-Askariya shrine. Our understanding is that the multi-sectarian delegation planned to discuss routine cross-border issues such as trade, electrical supply and return of refugees; despite any apparent urgent need to travel to Iran, however, the Governor elected at that time to continue his visit. The decision left the province stripped of top leaders at a critical time; the delegation is currently scheduled to return to Diyala on March 1.

FEB 23: LARGE, PEACEFUL DEMOS THROUGHOUT DIYALA

¶6. (C) The morning of February 23 saw a wave of demonstrations in Shi'a population centers. The largest of these demonstrations, incorporating some 2,000 people, was held in Kan'an, a town east of Ba'qubah that is neither particularly large nor particularly dominated by Shi'as; the demonstration was organized by leading independent Shi'as, including Deputy Provincial Council Chairman Sheikh Dhari Tha'baan al-Asadi. A 1,000-person demonstration in the northwestern Shi'a center of Khalis included a substantial number of apparent JAM members armed with semiautomatic weapons.

¶7. (SBU) Smaller demonstrations, numbering several hundred people, took place in Ba'qubah, Muqdadiah, al-Ghalabiya (a

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village outside of Khalis), and the southeastern cities of Mandali and Balad Ruz. As at Khalis, the march in Muqdadiah allegedly incorporated armed JAM members to protect it. After the events of the previous afternoon and evening, the Sunni leadership viewed this as a provocation and reacted by arming themselves; they did not, however, strike back. In Balad Ruz, our Sunni and Shi'a contacts tell us that Sunnis and Shi'as marched together, chanting, "We are free, Sunni and Shi'a; this homeland we will not sell."

FEB 24 AND AFTER: CONSTRUCTIVE SERMONS AND EQUILIBRIUM RESTORED

¶8. (C) By February 24, our contacts were reporting that all was quiet. A crowd gathering that morning at the primary Shi'a mosque in Muqdadiah (which allegedly included armed JAM members) was dispersed after the Sunni mayor of Muqdadiah contacted the imam of the mosque to request that he take steps to control the group. Attendance at Friday prayers was light due to the curfew, but those of our contacts who did attend reported that the imams of the mosques preached sermons rejecting takfirism and calling for unity and restraint. (This information tracks with the wider survey of mosque sermons carried out by the CF brigade stationed in Diyala, and with the assurances made to SET prior to the sermons by the Chairmen of both the Shi'a Waqf and the Sunni Waqf.) A February 25 press conference brought together Diyala's ranking Sunni and Shi'a political officeholders, the local commanders of the Iraqi Army and Iraqi police, and representatives of the Shi'a Waqf and Sunni Waqf to deliver the same message.

¶9. (C) The curfews over the past several days have been maintained in Diyala's cities with varying degrees of stringency, but without substantial further incident. IA elements have tended to enforce the curfew more strictly than

IP, who reportedly took advantage of the curfew and consequent lines at the gas station to fill up their various vehicles.

HIGH PROFILE FOR JAYSH AL-MAHDI

¶10. (C) One constant feature of the various accounts that we have received from Diyala's major cities is the presence of armed JAM throughout the period following the Samarra mosque explosion. (Ba'qubah is the notable exception to this rule.) Aside from the events of February 22 in Muqdadiyah (the exact details of which are still in considerable debate), the presence of these elements does not appear to have provoked sectarian violence. After their participation in "protecting" several of the marches on February 23, the JAM generally restricted themselves to protecting the Sadrists offices and principal Shi'a mosques, and did not often appear on the street outside of the vicinity of these places.

¶11. (C) (NOTE: JAM mosque "protectors" appear to have primarily focused their efforts on large mosques rather than those with Sadrists leadership, many of which remained unguarded; their efforts in turn appear to have been welcomed by the imams of those mosques, regardless of their affiliations. An example of this was the al-Imam al-Hussein Mosque in Balad Ruz, whose imam Taleb al-'Utbi is the principal deputy of Abdulrazzaq al-Asadi, Ayatollah Sistani's "envoy" in Diyala.)

LITTLE ISF INTEREST IN CONFRONTING SADRISTS

¶12. (C) Despite relative JAM restraint, ISF tolerance of the presence of armed Shi'a militiamen on the streets during a period of high tension was troubling to Diyala's Sunnis, who allege IP complicity in the events in Muqdadiyah on February 22 and contrast the tolerance of armed Shi'as with the hard line against armed Sunnis - four of whom, armed only with sticks, were detained by the IP on February 26. In Khalis, the sustained presence of JAM in the marketplace (which lies between the city's principal Shi'a mosque and the Sadrists office) provoked continued complaints to us and to the ISF from the city's Sunnis. None of these complaints appears to have provoked the ISF to disarm JAM forces or order them off the street. The lone counterexample to this pattern during this period occurred on February 24, when IA elements responded positively to a request by a Sunni village in southwestern Diyala for protection against a JAM incursion (which did not, in the end, materialize).

¶13. (C) In part, the reluctance of the ISF to deal with JAM may have stemmed from a desire not to provoke an unnecessary

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confrontation - and the results appear to vindicate this course of action. Another reason for the lack of ISF action may have been the apparently semi-legitimate status of the people guarding the mosques. Assistant Governor Hafiz al-Juburi, requesting from the Muqdadiyah Chief of Police action against the men dressed in black patrolling around the area of the market, was told that the IP could not take action because those men held valid IDs issued by the Ministry of the Interior, naming them as members of the Public Order Battalions.

¶14. (S) On the other hand, there are indications that the ISF reluctance to come to grips with the JAM may have had more to do with the JAM's perceived status as an ally in protecting the Shi'a from further attacks. The Deputy Governor, while maintaining positive rhetoric towards the ISF in public, has in private accused the IP of actively cooperating with JAM in many cases - and in some cases, of serving as active members of JAM. The police chiefs in the principal areas where JAM were active - Khalis, Muqdadiyah, Balad Ruz, Khan Bani Sa'd, and Abu Sayda - are all Shi'as, and we have heard similar accusations from other Sunni contacts. As is often the case in Diyala, it is difficult

to tease out how much of the alleged collusion is real and how much is conspiracy theory, especially in the face of such one-sided demographics

¶115. (S) The Deputy Governor's estimation of the IA performance was substantially more positive; in contrast to the IP, he sees them as having been scrupulously fair. However, even the IA seems to have been unwilling to confront the JAM. The Shi'a commander of the IA battalion assigned to Muqdadiyah - considered by CF to be one of the most dynamic commanders in Diyala - refused repeated requests by the Sunni Muqdadiyah mayor to bring troops into the market on February 22, well after there was evidence that people were being shot there, on the basis that it was not his job to intervene in political infighting. In one case just outside of Diyala, the identification between Shi'a members of the ISF and Shi'a militias showed clearer links: CF in southern Salah ad Din were able to successfully and peacefully turn around a convoy of 80 black-clad, armed men heading from Balad towards Samarra after the leader of the CF unit was recognized by a member of the convoy - who was also a sergeant in the IA unit with which the CF officer had worked.

COMMENT

¶116. (C) Though the massacres of February 24-25 have dominated media coverage of Diyala's response to the Samarra mosque explosion, the overall picture was a positive one. Shi'as were able to sufficiently assuage their grief through peaceful demonstrations; the Sunnis, despite a profusion of rumors of Shi'a atrocities, the wounding of the brother of the Deputy Governor, and the provocative presence on the streets of armed Shi'a militiamen, remained disciplined enough to keep the conflict from escalating. Those members of the often-contentious provincial leadership who were present in Diyala ultimately came together with a consistent message of unity and restraint, though the Governor's puzzling decision not to cut short his trip to Iran left him looking both shortsighted and risk-averse. Ultimately, the province emerged from crisis without any major conflict outside of the extreme southwest (which were likely reprisals neither for the Samarra explosion nor for the attacks on Sunni mosques in Baghdad - septel).

¶117. (S) On the other hand, the events following the Samarra explosion also provided indications of potential problems if the ISF is ever ordered to confront the JAM. The restraint of both the JAM and the Sunnis allowed the IA to avoid taking sides in the aftermath of the Samarra bombing, leaving open the question of how it would respond if ever ordered to confront the JAM. By contrast, the cooperative approach evident in the IP's relationship with the JAM during the events of the past several days provides a clear sign of where their loyalties might lie in future crises.

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